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12-2018

# Karaoke Car Talk with Mark Pettit

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### Recommended Citation

Frances H. Miller, *Karaoke Car Talk with Mark Pettit*, 98 Boston University Law Review 1781 (2018).

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## TRIBUTES

### KARAOKE CAR TALK WITH MARK PETTIT

FRANCES H. MILLER\*

Mark Pettit and I played our own version of Carpool Karaoke long before it became a media favorite. Mark was the quiet one, a prisoner in my car for more than forty years of driving back and forth to the Law School on the Mass Pike. We were cooped up alone together for an hour and a half almost every day, sometimes under trying circumstances, including monumental traffic jams and weather horrendiomas. Some days we had more direct conversation with one another than either one of us had with our own spouses. So I thought I'd give you a little insight into our car talk, for Mark was a very special person. You can learn a lot about another person when he can't escape you.

I did the driving, but Mark had his duties. For starters, I asked him to change the Honda's clock every time we switched to daylight savings time. And vice versa. He had to check me on the right when I needed to break into traffic. He read the manual whenever some weird light started flashing on the dashboard, and more often than not he fixed whatever was wrong. Finally, he paid the tolls. No small deal when you're traveling the Mass Turnpike. Jack Beermann tells me all those quarters were actually Mark's poker winnings; he was a legendary faculty poker player.

Mark had an encyclopedic knowledge of pop music—he could identify practically any song from the first two bars. I tested him daily, cruising up as he stood by the stone wall where the Leo J. Martin Golf Course runs beside the Charles River, radio blaring. He knew his job: “That's Percy Sledge singing a medley of his top hit (singular noun intentional), *When A Man Loves a Woman*.” Identification would usually be complete before he'd even get the door shut. He almost never let me down.

Mark was nationally known for belting out his students' contracts lyrics set to popular music,<sup>1</sup> but he'd almost never sing those clever lyrics for me in the car. His bond with his students was special: he trusted them instinctively and was unafraid to appear utterly ridiculous in front of them. They showered him with affection and respect in return. I guess he just didn't trust me that much.

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<sup>1</sup> Tovia Smith, *Singing Law Professor Rocks the Classroom*, NPR (Nov. 14, 2017, 5:28 PM), <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16275927> [<https://perma.cc/B3DU-3EDQ>].

One evening as we were driving home after a flash-flood rainstorm, the Honda stalled out going through a deep puddle. I had to pull over to the side for twenty minutes while the brakes dried out. So just to kill time I said, "OK, tell me something I don't know."

Pause.

"Well . . . um . . . Elaine and I are having another baby in a couple of months."

"What? You haven't bothered to tell me 'til now?"

"I wasn't sure you'd be interested."

"What planet do you *live* on?"

That was Mark through and through, modest and unassuming to a fault. But obviously I needed to up my interrogation game. So I started asking him about everything, and I do mean *everything*, on our daily rides. He'd react to the edgy stuff with:

"Oh, no! I'm not going *there* . . ."

"Oh, yes you are. You're my captive and you know I'll worm it out of you sooner or later. It might as well be now."

I became pretty skilled at dragging things out of him, and ultimately he understood that I wasn't going to give up so he might as well continue the conversation. Amazing how much I learned about the mind and the basic decency of that magnificent man—still waters run very, very deep. The only thing he wouldn't do was talk disparagingly about other people. Never once in more than forty years did I hear him say anything negative about another person,<sup>2</sup> though Lord knows I tried. He simply would not speak ill of another human being—that was built into his DNA.

One warm fall day when I stopped by near the end of his office hours to say it was time to go home, I thought I detected a faint blush rise on his cheeks. A lovely student was sitting there in a tank top, asking serious questions about contracts. When we got to the car I remarked, "That young lady in your office was really quite beautiful." He gave me the best response ever: "Actually, I did think her clavicles were quite fetching." That answer was pure Mark. A real straight arrow in all matters of consequence, but a great appreciator of art and beauty nonetheless.

Mark and I had only one fight in more than forty years. He misunderstood a sardonic comment I made decades ago as we were pulling into the Warren Towers garage, and went nuclear on me. He had never been even slightly angry in my presence before, and seeing him shaking, blue eyes blazing in alien fury, truly shocked me. He stalked out of the Honda and down Commonwealth Avenue without speaking. I trailed behind in disbelief, wondering what on earth he'd found so offensive, and how we could ever repair the breach.

About an hour later Mark appeared at my office door. "I'm sorry, but I thought you made an ethnic slur. I should have known better because now I realize you

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<sup>2</sup> Except for a certain politician, who shall be nameless.

were just being sarcastic. Forgive me.” Of *course* I’d forgive him, almost anything. No harm, no foul. (And besides, I needed those tolls.)

I was with Mark in the hours before he died, but had promised the Dean to attend a law school fiftieth reunion celebration that evening. He was near death and knew it, but begged me to go, and to feel happy, not sad, about him. He talked about what a marvelous life he’d had, with the most perfect wife and family ever, and “the best job in the whole world. I’ve been so lucky!”

I replied, “Sweetheart, you can’t leave. My clock is still on Eastern Standard Time.”

His answer? “Then here’s how you fix it . . . .”

That was Mark Pettit, teaching to the very end. He was the finest human being I have ever known.